DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 452 582 EA 030 930

AUTHOR	Huffman, Jane B.; Hipp, Kristine A.
TITLE	Creating Communities of Learners: The Interaction of Shared Leadership, Shared Vision, and Supportive Conditions.
PUB DATE	2000-04-00
NOTE	18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Cooperation; *Cooperative Learning; *Educational Principles; Elementary Secondary Education; Leadership; *Leadership Styles; *Participative Decision Making; *Professional Development; Professional Training; *School Community Relationship; School Support
IDENTIFIERS	American Educational Research Association; *Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

ABSTRACT

This study examines the preliminary results of a 5-year national study on creating communities of learners, provides findings from teachers and principals at 20 schools, analyzes characteristics of high- and low-readiness schools, and discusses the interaction of leadership, vision, values, and the conditions required for professional learning communities (PLCs.) Characteristics of professional learning communities include shared authority and power, a united focus on student learning, collective learning by staff, supportive institutions, and the sharing of personal instructional practices. Effective leadership from the entire school community is needed to implement shared visions and values, and this requires developing the personal capacities of staff, and providing for adequate times and settings for peer dialogue and departmental communication. The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory project, "Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement," targets the creation of PLCs with co-developers in the Southeast, Midwest, and Northwest regions of the U.S. The preliminary data clearly suggest schools that have successfully integrated shared leadership, shared vision, and a supportive school culture are much better positioned to create professional learning communities than the less "change-ready" schools, which lacked similar markers of progress. Further research may reveal particular practices that facilitate integration in these three critical areas. (Contains 15 references.)(TEJ)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 452 582

Creating Communities of Learners:

The Interaction of Shared Leadership, Shared Vision, and Supportive Conditions

Jane B. Huffman
University of North Texas
College of Education
P.O. Box 311337
Denton, Texas 76203
940 565-2832
huffman@unt.edu

Kristine A. Hipp
Cardinal Stritch University
College of Education
6801 North Yates Road
Milwaukee, WI 53217
414/410-4346
khipp@acs.stritch.edu

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Paper presented
at the
Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association
New Orleans, Louisiana
April 24-28, 2000

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY:
J Huffman
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

EA 030930

Creating Communities of Learners:

The Interaction of Shared Leadership, Shared Vision, and Supportive Conditions

Introduction

For more than twenty years, educators, policy makers, and others have targeted efforts for school reform from top-down bureaucratic governance to a more shared and collaborative focus on decision-making and innovative improvement processes. While these efforts have been admirable, and many dedicated educators have spent years working to achieve results, unfortunately the results have been disappointing. Students are still not achieving as successfully as parents and society want them to, and the challenge to increase student performance to state and national standards has raised the accountability stakes to an all-time high. Schlechty (1997) commented: "The demands of modern society are such that America's public schools must now provide what they have never provided before: a first-rate academic education for nearly all students" (p.235).

What has gone wrong? What can schools and educators do to affect long-lasting change that addresses the needs of our students and society? Fragmented change efforts, including the Excellent Movement in the 1980s and the Restructuring Movement in the 1990s, have introduced changed initiatives, but produced minimal school improvement. What is needed is a systematic plan that coordinates and implements the essential elements needed for school improvement and student achievement. Cuban (1988) called for second-order change that would fundamentally alter organizational culture, structure, and leadership roles in schools. This reculturing of schools has been characterized by shared values and norms, an emphasis on student learning, reflective

dialogue, deprivatization of practice, and collaboration (Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996). Sergiovanni (1994) calls on schools to become communities where professional learning is continuous, reflective, and focused on improving student outcomes. But building a professional learning community is difficult due to the many demands on teachers and administrators, the growing accountability issues, the increasingly diverse needs of students, teacher isolation and burn-out, and many other unmanageable stressors. To develop, nurture, and sustain a community of learners means creating a different culture that includes a shared vision, true collaboration, administrator and teacher leadership, and conditions that support these efforts (Mitchell & Sackney, 1999).

Purpose

"There is growing evidence that the best hope for significant school improvement is transforming schools into professional learning communities" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 17). The challenge that this statement describes invites educators to examine the guiding principles of professional learning communities to determine what we must do for substantive school improvement. Newmann & Wehlage (1995) describe professional community as schools "characterized by shared purpose, collaborative activity, and collective responsibility among staff" (p. 37).

The purpose of this paper is to: (a) examine preliminary results of a five-year national study of creating communities of continuous inquiry and improvement within schools; (b) report findings gathered from teachers and principals representing 20 schools; (c) analyze the importance of emerging characteristics of high-readiness and low-readiness schools; and (d) discuss the significance of the interaction of shared and supportive leadership, shared vision and

values, and the supportive conditions necessary to develop professional learning communities.

This study is one component of a multi-year study sponsored by Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL). The findings reported in this paper reveal important data that informs researchers and practitioners about critical characteristics of schools in the process of creating communities of learners. Information included in this report, based on reports from teachers and principals in the schools across the nation, will provide perspectives from many different people in varied situations. This meaningful research offers important directions for restructuring 21st century schools and improving education for our children.

Based on an understanding of the early findings of this broad-based research, the paper focuses on the following questions:

1. In their efforts to become professional learning communities, how are high-readiness and low-readiness schools different in the areas of shared leadership, vision and supportive conditions?
2. How do the emerging practices in these three areas develop the capacity to create professional learning communities?

Theoretical Framework

For this study the theoretical framework and its defining attributes are primarily based on the work of Hord (1997), who identified professional learning community as the professional staff learning together to direct their efforts toward improved student learning. Hord identified five dimensions as attributes of schools with successful professional learning communities in place. The dimensions are:

1. Supportive and shared leadership: School administrators participate democratically

with teachers sharing power, authority, and decision making.

2. Shared values and vision: Staff shared visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning, and are consistently referenced for the staff's work.
3. Collective learning and application of learning: Staff's collective learning and application of the learnings (taking action) create high intellectual learning tasks and solutions to address student needs.
4. Supportive conditions: School conditions and capacities support the staff's arrangement as a professional learning organization.
5. Shared personal practice: Peers review and give feedback on teachers' instructional practice in order to increase individual and organizational capacity.

While Hord's research examines the whole school professional learning community concept, other research addresses three of the dimensions specifically. In the first dimension, supportive and shared leadership, it is clear that effective school communities have shared leadership extending throughout the school to faculty, staff, and administrators. Successful communities of learners share important concerns and relationships in their efforts to achieve results for students. This requires a new concept of leadership in which administrators and teachers take responsibility for leadership and decision-making. In her landmark book, Leading to Change, Johnson (1996) emphasized:

> Today's school leaders must understand both the limits and the potential of their positions, carefully balancing their use of positional authority with their reliance on others, gradually building both a capacity and widespread support for shared leadership

and collaborative change. (p. 11)

Furthermore, shared leadership promotes a multitude of interactions and relationships that build capacity for change. Lambert (1998) stated in her book, Building Leadership Capacity in Schools, that:

> School leadership needs to be a broad concept that is separated from person, role, and a discrete set of individual behaviors. It needs to be embedded in the school community as whole. The key notion in this definition is that leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. (p. 5)

Regarding the second dimension, shared values and vision, it becomes readily apparent in school organizations that if you don't have a vision, it is impossible to develop effective policies, procedures, and strategies targeted toward a future goal, or aligned to provide consistent implementation of programs. Senge (1990) stated, "you cannot have a learning organization without a shared vision" (p.209). An effective vision presents a credible yet realistic picture of the organization that inspires the participants to reach for a future goal.

Yet, simply declaring a vision by a school leader and imposing it on the organization will not generate the collective energy needed to propel an organization forward. The central task of the leader is to build a vision including all participants in the organization. Personal visions must be developed and shared so that a collective vision can be molded and embraced by all members. This collaborative vision-building is the initial challenge for learning communities.

DuFour and Eaker (1998) addressed shared vision in this description:

> What separates a learning community from an ordinary school is its collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the people in the school believe

and what they seek to create. Furthermore, these guiding principles are not just articulated by those in positions of leadership; even more important, they are embedded in the hearts and minds of people throughout the school. (p. 25)

Developing this capacity to construct meaning represented by a vision is a formidable task. It is a task that many schools do not even begin to address. Barth (1990) suggests one way to begin designing this shared vision:

> Honoring the visions of others, maintaining fidelity to one's own vision, and at the same time working toward a collective vision and coherent institutional purpose constitute an extraordinary definition of school leadership and represent one of the most important undertakings facing those who would improve schools from within. (p. 156)

Supporting the work of learning communities requires leaders to address the third dimension, supportive conditions. This includes both the cultural aspect of the school, and the structural considerations. Researchers (Boyd, 1992; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Louis & Kruse, 1995) identify these two types of conditions as necessary in building effective learning communities: (1) the people capacities of those involved, and (2) the physical, or structural, conditions. These factors support the work of teachers and administrators by providing time and opportunities to communicate regularly, plan collectively, problem solve, and learn.

Louis and Kruse's (1995) list of physical, or structural, conditions needed to support communities of learners includes: time to meet and dialogue, physical proximity of the staff to one another in departments or grade level groups, small school size, collaborative teaching roles and responsibilities, effective communication programs, autonomous school units that are connected in meaningful ways to the district office and personnel, and teacher leadership that

provides opportunities for teachers to influence decision-making.

These structural conditions are clearly important so staff and administration have available resources to conduct their work without major logistical barriers. However, Schlechty (1997) reminds us that "Structural change that is not supported by cultural change will eventually be overwhelmed by the culture, for it is in the culture that any organization finds meaning and stability" (p. 136).

Boyd (1992) describes the people or cultural factors that create a meaningful and stable culture. Such factors include: teacher attitudes that are consistently positive; an academic focus for students; norms that support ongoing learning and improvement, not the status quo; a collective shared vision; participatory decision-making; teachers who share and learn with each other, and a sense of responsibility for student learning and success.

Methodology

As reported by Olivier, Cowan, and Pancake (2000), the research project, now in its fifth year, has been designed and managed by Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), one of the ten regional educational research and development laboratories in the United States. The project entitled, *Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*, targets the creation of professional learning communities (PLCs). Twenty-five participants, representing a broad range of professional educators, collaborated with SEDL in this study and assumed the role of Co-Developers. Most of the Co-Developers came from the five states in SEDL's service area: Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. However, four Co-Developers are from the Southeast, Midwest, and Northwest regions of the United States. This research study focuses on data collected from twenty of these school sites during the first

year of the school site involvement in this project.

In the first year of the project, SEDL staff conducted a literature review of professional learning communities. That review resulted in the identification of the five dimensions of PLCs. The second year was devoted to locating schools within SEDL's region that reflected characteristics of PLCs. SEDL staff interviewed, teachers, administrators, and others working in these identified five schools to learn how these schools became professional learning communities. These retrospective studies provided insight into how the schools became professional learning communities, but they also revealed that rich details have been lost in the memories of those engaged in the process.

Also during the second year, individuals who had worked with SEDL in previous projects and other educators were invited to participate in the project. The first meeting of those who became Co-Developers was held in November of 1997 and included thirty educators. The purposes of this meeting were to allow us, the Co-Developers, to meet one another, learn more about the project and engage commitment to the study over the next three years. In subsequent meetings Co-Developers identified skills and competencies we would need as external facilitators to help schools become professional learning communities. With SEDL's support, we set about teaching one another what we knew about school improvement consistent with this model, and to finding resources to help us grow and learn together. In additions, we read and studied together, developed deeper professional relationships, and passionately discussed school reform issues. In the process, the group of Co-Developers and SEDL staff were, themselves, becoming a professional learning community.

The third year marked the beginning of the Co-Developers' work with schools. Prior to

the beginning of the 1998-99 school year, we were asked to select schools to which we would commit knowledge, skill, time, and energy over the next two years. The schools selected represent elementary, middle, and high school levels and reflect rural, suburban, and urban settings.

In the fall of 1998, Co-Developers interviewed twenty principals and twenty teachers from the participating schools by using a semi-structured interview protocol. The purpose of the interviews was to ascertain the school's status within each of the five dimensions of professional learning communities in the early stages of the project. A semi-structured interview protocol guided these interviews. These interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed utilizing the five identified dimensions. A six-person collaborative research team (one SEDL staff member and five Co-Developers) used these analyses to determine where, along a continuum ranging from high to low levels of readiness for becoming a learning community, each school fell. Inter-rater reliability methods were also used to establish these levels. Researchers studied salient characteristics of each readiness level and derived common themes that described each level of readiness. The focus of this paper is on the resulting data pertaining to three specific dimensions: shared leadership, shared vision, and supportive conditions.

Findings

It was clear from this initial research that the driving force behind schools that were at a high-readiness for creating a professional learning community, was the emerging integration of shared leadership, shared vision, and a supportive school culture. The data suggest there are distinguishing characteristics in "change ready" schools that provide the impetus for the creation of professional learning communities. Although the majority of schools studied were not at a

high-level of readiness in all dimensions, seven schools exhibited examples of mid-level to high-level readiness with regard to leadership, vision, and supportive conditions.

Shared Leadership

In high-readiness schools, principals were proactive. They intuitively sensed where support was needed, when to nurture, and when to take charge. Principals encouraged teachers to initiate change and share responsibility and rewards for innovative actions. Teachers in these schools were constantly seeking information and sharing their expertise with colleagues. One Louisiana teacher commented: "She [the principal] let's us make decisions . . . she is very willing to hear our opinions or take our advice . . . she is one of the first to admit she doesn't have all the answers." They were involved in productive committee/departmental/grade level work that resulted in substantive efforts, and when appropriate, meaningful change. A Texas teacher said: " . . . most decisions are probably made at the team meeting . . . most decisions that affect the academics and even the discipline of the students, are made at the team meeting level." An example of engaged teachers is described by this Texas principal: "The faculty has more power than ever before. At first the teachers were overwhelmed, with their new role, but now they enjoy taking responsibility. I keep emphasizing, it's your school. I want them to feel empowered and engaged in the school."

In contrast, in low-readiness schools, many teachers viewed shared leadership suspiciously, content to exhibit leadership in their classrooms, but opposed to accepting responsibility at the building level. They may have understood the concept of shared leadership, but were unwilling to risk involvement. Principals were reactive, directive, or laissez faire, either due to their leadership style, or due to their perception of low capacity for leadership within their

school.

Shared Vision

The concept of a shared vision in many schools was often misunderstood and confused with a limited focus. In high-readiness schools, staff expressed a picture of a desired future centered on student learning beyond test scores and traditional grades. Student learning and application of knowledge were foremost in the minds of teachers and administrators. A principal explained it this way: "We are focused and have the same vision. We know that is where we want to go and what to do to get there. We are together. All departments agreeing that this is the way it's going to be. It is a shared thing." Programs adopted or actions taken were related to the vision and fit into the overall picture for the students.

Many people in low-readiness schools expressed limited buy-in to what they perceived as someone else's vision. They believed their input was minimal, their power was nonexistent, and consequently their involvement was inconsistent and unreliable. One teacher lamented:

> We want what is best for the kids, but we don't share a common vision of how to get to that point. We have a mission statement, but as far as all of us being on the same page, we aren't. Teachers see themselves as autonomous units. Just to get to the point where we could trust and talk freely to each other about issues related to education has been an obstacle to overcome.

In high-readiness schools, teachers initiated and took responsibility for change without any evidence of imposed power and authority. A teacher explained it well: "Our school's shared vision is focused toward student learning and achievement. The lines of subject area have been erased, and teachers are collaborating to discuss content outside the realm of their particular

subject area in the classes."

Supportive Conditions

It was reported that one reason teachers were unwilling to commit to shared vision or shared leadership was due to the lack of the cultural conditions of trust and respect. A Wisconsin teacher said: " . . . trust is the first level at getting to professional learning community." In high-readiness schools, the vision was nurtured and continually revealed to push the existing limits. Principals supported staff in reorganizing time opportunities to expand their capacity and to challenge them to consider new actions. Principals respected faculty, honored their diversity, and involved them in all stages of decision-making. A Louisiana teacher commented: " . . . we [teachers] are just making decisions . . . along the way . . . we are living with those consequences rather than seeking permission for every single thing we do . . ." Principals also valued teachers and their contributions by monitoring and praising their actions, and creating pathways to success. A Texas teacher explained: "The school administration encourages staff to attend workshops, and provides appropriate funds to do so." Due to this supportive climate, teachers felt safe in their environment and were more inclined to take risks.

In low-readiness schools, a few people, or a select team, which excluded the majority of teachers, made decisions. Principals were either reactive and punitive, or passive and perceived as uncaring. This resulted in teachers being less than committed and unfocused in their efforts to improve. Principals said teachers were involved or empowered, but reserved the right to make the final decision. Principals in high-readiness schools take every opportunity to be present in the lives of the staff and are flexible in their support of teacher-initiated programs and strategies. A Texas teacher elaborates:

Teachers feel supported, able to make decisions, and validated as professionals. The principal regularly substitutes in the classroom so teachers can attend staff development. She knows the names of students and their families. . . The principal supports new ideas by saying, 'let's try it', and if it doesn't work, 'let's quit doing it.' is her attitude."

Educational Importance

This paper illustrates a new model for school improvement that involves the entire professional staff in continuous learning and collaboration. It introduces the professional learning community model in which Hord (1997) examines the five important dimensions; shared leadership, shared vision, collective inquiry, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. While all dimensions are important, this paper cites data that shows how three dimensions, shared leadership, shared vision, and supportive conditions are interrelated and critical to the success of any learning community.

Even though the data is baseline information, the initial analysis has uncovered rich findings that serve as a foundation for future research projects. Project schools representative of high-readiness schools, offer the researcher a picture of learning communities that are changing the way they work together and achieve outcomes for students. These findings serve to inform readers as well as the Co-Developers as we continue our work with schools. This information should extend to other schools since the initial sample was varied in size, economic factors, school-level, other demographic characteristics, and readiness levels.

Results from this study speak to the heart of educational reform for the 21st century. It is clear that schools involved in sincere efforts to broaden the base of leadership to include teachers and administrators, to define shared vision based on student learning, and to provide a culture of

continual support, will make great strides in becoming professional learning communities. As we delve deeper into the ongoing research, specific strategies addressing these three areas will be uncovered to reveal even more promising practices. As Barth (1990) argued:

> A school can fulfill no higher purpose than to teach all of its members that they can make what they believe in happen and to encourage them to contribute to and benefit from the leadership of others. A community of leaders is a vision of what might become a vital part of the school culture. Without shared leadership, it is impossible for a professional culture to exist in a school (pgs. 171-172).

References

Barth, R. S. (1990). *Improving schools from within.* San Francisco, CA. Jossey-Bass.

Boyd, V. (1992). *School context: Bridge or barrier to change?* Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Cuban, L. (1988). A fundamental puzzle of school reform. Phi Delta Kappan, 70(5), 341-44.

Dufour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work. Best practices for enhancing student achievement.* Bloomington, IN. National Educational Service.

Hord, S. M. (1997). *Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement.* Austin, TX. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Johnson, S. M. (1996). *Leading to change.* San Francisco, CA. Jossey-Bass.

Lambert, L. (1998). *Building leadership capacity in schools.* Alexandria, VA. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Louis, K. S., & Kruse, S. D. (1995). *Professionalism and community: Perspectives on reforming urban schools.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Louis, K. S., Kruse, S. D., & Marks, H. M. (1996). School wide professional community. In F.M. Newman & Associates (Eds.). Authentic achievement: Restructuring schools for intellectual quality (pp. 179-203). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mitchell, C., & Sackney, L. (1999). *Leadership for a learning community.* (In Review).

Newmann, F. & Wehlage, G. (1995). *Successful school restructuring: A report to the*

public and educators by the Center for Restructuring Schools. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin.

Olivier, D., Cowan, D., & Pankake, A. (2000). *Professional learning communities: Cultural characteristics.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southwest Educational Research Association, January 27-30, Dallas, TX.

Schlechty, P. (1997). *Inventing better schools: An action plan for education reform.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization.* New York: Doubleday Currency.

Sergiovanni, T. J. (1994). Organizations or communities? Changing the metaphor changes the theory. Educational Administration Quarterly, 30(2), 214-226.